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SOME IMPRESSIONS OF MY ELDERS

G. K. CHESTERTON

BY ST. JOHN ERVINE

I

THERE is a legend, much beholden to Shakespeare, that learning and leanness are akin to each other, while dull wits flourish in company with obesity. The curious submission sometimes made by Shakespeare to common prejudices and ignorance, glorified by the name of legend, caused him too often to forget the obligation of the aristocrat to think for himself, and remember only to think with the mob; and the singular fact about this forgetfulness of his is that when he chose to think with the mob, he nearly always did so when the mob was in the wrong. He preferred the judgment of the street to the judgment of informed minds when he wrote *Richard the Third*, and allowed himself to malign that excellent and most capable prince and monarch. Richard was one of the ablest of the kings of England, but Shakespeare, forgetting his obligations to his own genius, portrays him as a pervert with a mania for blood. He yields to the common view in his references to fat men. Falstaff is fat and flighty and a coward, a drunkard, a braggart and a misleader of young princes, although the prototype of Sir John was himself a man of known courage. Cassius was deemed to think too much because he had a lean and hungry look. Julius Caesar desired the society of fat men who, presumably, indulged but seldom in thought and never in any that could be called dangerous. Fat men are endowed with but one tolerable virtue: that of good nature; and if any fat man ever enters heaven, it will be because of his equable temper and in spite of his corpulence.

Mr. Chesterton is a fat man. There is a rumor in England that many Americans felt they had been defrauded of their money when they went to hear him lecture lately because he was hardly

so fat as they had been led to believe! He certainly is not so bulky now, because of a serious illness, as he was when I first knew him, but in those days he was undeniably an enormous man. And in himself he is a complete refutation of the legend that fat men are dull men. Dr. Johnson was another fat man whose large flesh covered a large intellect. Dr. Johnson, indeed, was so able a man that, in spite of an incorrigibly lazy character, which kept him abed of mornings when he ought to have been improving the shining hour, he compiled a dictionary with little assistance which, so Frenchmen said, would have engaged the labors of forty French scholars for a long time.

These legends about men of wit and dull men need to be revised. There have been as many fat men of genius as there have been lean men of genius. There have been as many epicurean geniuses as there have been ascetic geniuses—indeed, my experience is that men of great mental energy are fonder of their food than many men with torpid minds; and some of the ablest men I know are excessively addicted to the pleasures of the table. Mr. Shaw is a fastidious feeder, with odd likes and dislikes, but no one could say that he is indifferent to what he eats. It is, I think, an ironic commentary on the legend that fat men are lacking in cleverness, that much the cleverest of those who oppose the opinions of the lean Mr. Shaw is the fat Mr. Chesterton.

Mr. Chesterton, indeed, was sent into the world by an All-Just God for the exclusive purpose of saying the opposite to Mr. Shaw. With the most complimentary intention I say that Mr. Chesterton's job in the world is, when Mr. Shaw speaks, to reply, "On the contrary! . . ." He has to restore the balance which Mr. Shaw very vigorously disturbs. Mr. Chesterton is considerably younger than Mr. Shaw, much younger than most people, on seeing him, imagine him to be. He was born in London in 1874, and therefore is still three years short of fifty. His book on Browning was published when he was twenty-nine, and *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* when he was thirty. The bulk of his work, and certainly the best of it, with the exception of the *Short History of England*, was published before he was forty. The bulk, and certainly the best, of Mr. Shaw's work was published after he had passed his fortieth year. A critic comparing the two

writers ought to remember that Mr. Shaw's work is mainly that of a mature man, whereas that of Mr. Chesterton is mainly the work of a young man.

II

Gilbert Keith Chesterton is commonly known as a writer of paradox. He is something of a paradox himself, for he is half-Scotch, half-French, and wholly English. This paradox is not any more startling than the fact that yellow and blue, when mixed together, become green. England is half-way between Scotland and France! He handles paradox very skilfully, but there are times when he imagines he is making a paradox and is only making a pun; and there are other times when he is merely making nonsense. He states in a book called *What's Wrong With the World* that "the prime truth of woman, the universal mother" is "that if a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly." That is a singular paradox! I can understand a prime truth which declares that a thing is worth doing, even if it be done badly, but I cannot understand a prime truth which seems to make a merit of bad workmanship.

Elsewhere in the same book, he says that "submission to a weak man is discipline. Submission to a strong man is servility." The proper commentary on that paradox can only be made by a soldier. I can assure Mr. Chesterton that the discipline of a weak man is the nearest approach to tyranny I know, and it flies to pieces in times of great distress. Your strong man can hold thoroughly frightened men to their manhood with a word and a wave of the hand, but your weak man demoralizes them with the fretful tyranny which he calls strength. The submission of strong men to a weak man may be called discipline, but it would be better named self-assurance. But in the field itself, when authority and strength are needed, that weak man is quietly pushed into the background, and the really strong man, although he may be a private soldier, takes command. One can, of course, pick holes in many of Mr. Chesterton's paradoxes in that manner, but it is profitless to do so. Our work now is to discover what is of value in his doctrine and to describe what is unsound in it.

Roughly, one may say that Mr. Chesterton stands for the

common man against the very clever man. He believes more in the People than he believes in Particular Persons. As he himself would say, he trusts Man more than he trusts any man, a statement which reads better than it sounds. He believes in tradition, even in legend, which is the wisdom accumulated by Man, not out of his mind so much as out of his experience. He believes in the institution of private property, provided that the property is widely distributed. In other words, he believes in what is called Peasant Proprietorship. He does not believe in Progress as Mr. Wells, for example, believes in it, and he will tell you very emphatically that the common man was happier in the Middle Ages than he is to-day. There are times when it seems to me that Mr. Chesterton's "common man" is as mythical as the "average man" of the newspapers and the "economic man" of the economists; and I am very dubious about the happiness of the poor people of the Middle Ages. It would be foolish to carry one's doctrine too far, but if there is anything in this theory of Man deriving wisdom from experience, surely it is reasonable to suppose that human beings, having discovered a means of living which ensures some comfort and security to them, will not easily be deprived of it. Mr. Chesterton asks us to believe that the "common" man permitted the rich lord to rob him of his rights almost in ignorance of the fact that he was being robbed of them. It is just as probable that he was ignorant of them because he never had them.

Mr. Chesterton believes, too, in what he calls "the ancient and universal things" as against what he calls "the modern and specialist things." He has invented a theory which establishes man as the great specialist and woman as the great amateur, and he would keep woman out of the polling-booth, not because the vote is too good for her, but because it is not good enough. He demands that the woman shall stay in the home, not for the Teutonic reason that she is inferior to man and must work in a narrow area, but for the Chestertonic reason that she is capable of more varied work than man and can only find adequate range for her variety in the broad dominions of the home. "Women were not kept at home," he says, "in order to keep them narrow; on the contrary, they were kept at home in order to keep them broad."

The effort must seem to many persons to have been a singularly unsuccessful one, but Mr. Chesterton will have none of this sophistry. "I do not even pause to deny that woman was a servant; but at least she was a general servant," he asserts; discovering in her "generalness" a virtue where others would discover only a certainty of incompetence and muddle.

If drudgery only means dreadfully hard work, I admit the woman drudges in the home, as a man might drudge at the Cathedral of Amiens or drudge behind a gun at Trafalgar. But if it means that the hard work is more heavy because it is trifling, colorless and of small import to the soul, then, as I say, I give it up; I do not know what the words mean. To be Queen Elizabeth within a definite area, deciding sales, banquets, labors and holidays; to be Whiteley within a certain area, providing toys, boots, sheets, cakes and books; to be Aristotle within a certain area, teaching morals, manners, theology and hygiene—I can understand how this might exhaust the mind, but I cannot imagine how it could narrow it. How can it be a large career to tell other people's children about the Rule of Three, and a small career to tell one's own children about the universe? How can it be broad to be the same thing to everyone, and narrow to be everything to someone? No; a woman's function is laborious, but because it is gigantic, not because it is minute. I will pity Mrs. Jones for the hugeness of her task; I will never pity her for its smallness.

I have quoted that extensive passage because it is a good example of Mr. Chesterton's style and his thought. It is a mixture of soundness and unsoundness, in which the two things merge so imperceptibly that there is difficulty in distinguishing the one from the other. It is not easy to see why the stenographer, travelling to an office every morning at the same hour by the same underground railway, and typing more or less the same sort of letter for a specified number of hours before she returns every evening by the same underground railway to the home from which she set out in the morning, should be more broad-minded than the woman who stays at home performing a variety of jobs; and perhaps Mr. Chesterton is justified in his faith by the fact that the stenographer is most eager to escape from the office to the home by the way of marriage.

Nevertheless, I suspect that the home is not quite the broadening influence Mr. Chesterton declares it to be, and Mr. Chesterton himself provides me with the ground for my suspicion. To be Queen Elizabeth within a certain area may be enlarging for the

mind. To be Whiteley (or Marshall Field, in America) within a certain area may be enlarging for the mind. To be Aristotle within a certain area may be enlarging for the mind. But to be Queen Elizabeth *and* Whiteley *and* Aristotle within a certain area is paralyzing for the mind. The stenographer who does one thing every day, has time to think of many things: the wife and mother who does many things every day has time to think of nothing. I do not believe that the stenographer, who accepts the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood, regards the drudgery of them as an unparalleled opportunity for exhibiting her versatility; and I have observed that the people who are most keen on such "modern and specialist things" as labor-saving devices, are just those women who, in Mr. Chesterton's judgment, should be most reluctant to accept them.

III

His praise of the "ancient and universal things" at the expense of the "modern and specialist things" leads him to say that

If a man found a coil of rope in a desert he could at least think of all the things that can be done with a coil of rope; and some of them might be practical. He could tow a boat or lasso a horse. He could play cat's cradle or pick oakum. He could construct a rope-ladder for an eloping heiress, or cord her boxes for a travelling maiden aunt. He could learn to tie a bow, or he could hang himself. Far otherwise with the unfortunate traveller who should find a telephone in the desert. You can telephone with a telephone: you cannot do anything else with it.

He disparages the hot-water pipe in order to exalt the open fire. He argues that "the ancient and universal things" can be turned to many uses, but that the "modern and specialist things" are strictly limited to one purpose.

There may be much in his argument, though his examples hardly support him, but how much is not apparent. Take the case of the man in the desert who finds a coil of rope, and compare him with the man in the desert who finds a telephone. Mr. Chesterton begs us to observe how happy is the former compared with the latter, but is he one-half so happy? The absorbing passion of a man's life in a desert would be the desire to get out of the desert as quickly as possible. How far would a rope help

him to realize his desire? He could not tow a boat or lasso a horse because there would not be any water on which to tow the boat or any horse to lasso. If there were a horse to lasso it would either be wild and unrideable or private property. He could play at cat's cradle with the rope if it were not a rope at all—if, that is to say, it were twine; and perhaps this would help to pass away the time before he died of starvation. He could pick oakum if he wished to un-rope the rope and had never been to prison to discover what a loathsome job oakum-picking is. But he could not construct a rope-ladder for an eloping heiress or cord her boxes for his travelling maiden aunt, because the eloping heiress would not be eloping in a desert, and his maiden aunt would hardly be packing her trunk in the Sahara. He might be able to tie a bow. He might even be able to hang himself, though that is doubtful, for trees are not prolific in deserts. But I cannot see what comfort he would derive from either of these accomplishments.

To sum up, a man in a desert with nothing but a coil of rope between him and civilization would be in as complete a state of isolation as it would be possible for a man to imagine. How different would be the case of the man in a desert with the despised "modern and specialist" telephone! For he, finding a telephone, would instantly be able to communicate with other people and to direct them to his rescue. If he were anxious to hang himself, he could more effectively do so in the neighborhood of a telephone than in the neighborhood of a coil of rope, for where there are telephones there are generally telegraph-poles!

Even in the case of the open fire and the hot-water pipe, as much can be said for the "modern and specialist thing" as can be said for the "ancient and universal thing," and in some instances, more can be said for it. We get a cheerful glow from an open fire that certainly is not to be got from a hot-water pipe; but Mr. Chesterton must have noticed on many occasions that whereas one gets tolerably toasted on one side by an open fire, it usually leaves the other side cold. Thus a man, on a wintry night, sitting before a fire, may be too warm in front, and half-frozen behind. But a hot-water pipe creates an equable temperature in a room and leaves a man warm on all sides.

IV

He is a nationalist and therefore opposed to imperialism. His belief in peasant proprietorship flows naturally from his belief in nationalism. He defends peasant proprietorship in *Irish Impressions* because he believes that a country controlled by peasants will survive long after more majestically-governed nations have declined and fallen:—

I do not know how far modern Europe really shows a menace of Bolshevism, or how far merely a panic of Capitalism. But I know that if any honest resistance has to be offered to mere robbery, the resistance of Ireland will be the most honest and probably the most important. . . . It is where property is well distributed that it will be well defended. The post of honor will be with those who fight in very truth for their own land.

Now, here we are on very debateable ground, as debateable as his statement that “honor is a luxury for aristocrats, but it is a necessity for hall-porters,” which is surely an obscure rendering of the entirely commercial statement that “honesty is the best policy.” Honor is not honor when a man uses it merely because it is profitable to him, and I cannot see much virtue in him who fights for his land simply because he owns it. Honor is admirable when it brings not profit but loss to the man who wears it. Virtue is in the man who fights for his country though he does not own an inch of it. And here I come to my objection to Mr. Chesterton’s beloved peasant proprietorship, the cause of my dismay at the thought that my own country of Ireland may soon be controlled by small farmers.

It is true that a peasant will fight desperately for his own piece of land, but he manifests a sturdy reluctance to fight for another man’s land; and I cannot understand why Mr. Chesterton regards his determination to hold on to his property as more “honest” or more “honorable” than the determination of a Victory bondholder to get the last cent of interest out of the taxpayers. Peasants, no less than other men, in fact more than other men, have itching palms, and it is sheer sentimentalism to describe as “honest” or “honorable” behavior in them which is denounced as dishonest and dishonorable in a stockbroker. It is true that Lenin’s schemes collapsed completely before the resistance of the Russian

peasants, and that his plans for the nationalization of everything failed to include the principal thing of all, namely, the land; but Mr. Chesterton will hardly maintain that the Russian peasants had disinterested motives in offering this resistance to Lenin. He may, indeed, insist that their motives were entirely interested and base his case for the Distributive State, as Mr. Belloc named it, on that very interest. But a nation should be something more than a crowd of peasants digging in the earth for their personal profit, and when Mr. Chesterton commends his peasant proprietors to me, I ask not for the signs of their interested behavior, but for the signs of their disinterested behavior. When he tells me that the peasant will fight for his own land, I ask him whether the peasant will fight for his neighbor's land? When he tells me that the Irish peasant will resist the attempts of the Bolshevik to communalize his land, I ask him whether the Irish peasant is equally ready to defend the French peasant from Russian aggression? Mr. Chesterton declares that France had claims on the gratitude of Ireland. Did the Irish peasant farmer remember those claims on his gratitude? Or did he find it more convenient and profitable to ejaculate, "Yah, dirty atheist, go and fight your own battles!" In deriding the idea of empire, Mr. Chesterton says in this book of *Irish Impressions* that "the British combination" is "more lax and liable to schism" than a combination of peasants. I do not believe there is any truth in this statement, particularly when I remember that "the British combination" held together for five years in circumstances that might have been expected to shake it to pieces. Let me give an example, out of my experience during the War, of the way in which the Imperial idea rallies men to its support to their own loss. While I was being trained to be an officer, I shared a hut with twenty-five other men. Between us, we represented every part of the British Empire. The twenty-six men in that hut included Englishmen, Scotsmen, Welshmen and two Irishmen (one of whom was an Orangeman, and the other, myself, a Home Ruler). In addition to these, there were two Australians, a man from New Zealand, two men from Canada, two from South Africa and a couple of men from South America, one a Spaniard and the other the son of English parents. Many of these men had travelled for thou-

sands of miles at their own expense in order to join the British Army. They were volunteers. I would like to see the community of peasants that would travel ten yards to defend anything but their own personal property, except under compulsion.

When I cited this case to Mr. Chesterton some time ago, in controversy with him, he replied with characteristic amiability that Serbia was a community of peasants, and that Serbia had fought in the War. When I asked whether Serbia would have fought for Montenegro, he replied that she had done more than that, she had fought for "the wholly invisible bond of all Christendom." But Serbia did nothing of the sort. She fought for herself because she was invaded. That was a perfectly proper thing to do, but there is no comparison between it and the behavior of men responding at their own cost to the Imperial idea, although many hundreds of miles away from the place of argument and under no compulsion to go to it.

The truth about a peasant civilization is that it is a mean civilization, in which mean virtues compete with mean vices, and the small and local thing is esteemed above the big and world-wide thing. There are many defects in empires, even in one so loosely-bound as the British Empire, but although those who control an empire are often guilty of cruel deeds, there is at least this to be said in their defense, that they honestly believe themselves to be possessed of greater wisdom than those whom they oppress, and do desire in their stupid fashion to govern them for their good.

On the whole, freedom may be defined as the right to choose; but that definition must obviously be subject to limitations. There is a sort of wild and woolly democrat who believes in the right of uninstructed persons to choose wrong. It is not a right in which I believe. Mr. Chesterton thinks, not without justification, that the common man can choose in a right manner. If his creed were confined to that clause we could accept it with heartiness, but there are times when he seems to think that the common man chooses aright because he is a common man, and he leaves us with the impression that he can never quite forgive Magna Charta because it was won by peers, and not by peasants. He seems not to realize that if Magna Charta had depended upon peasants, it would never have been won.

V

But he helps us to keep a balance. His service to us is that when we are inclined to run frantically after the superman, he reminds us of the existence of the common man. If he were not so well-padded with flesh, I should describe him as the skeleton at a feast of supermen, reminding them that even a superman can be a fool.

There are times, indeed, when his faith in the common man undergoes a sea-change, and he utters sentiments that might be spoken by Mr. H. L. Mencken, who cannot abide the common mind. In one of his essays, Mr. Chesterton says, "I certainly would much rather share my apartments with a gentleman who thought he was God than with a gentleman who thought he was a grasshopper." So would Nietzsche. But I doubt whether the Early Christians would have approved his preference. They, who were ready to pronounce all flesh to be grass, would not have found anything incompatible with their faith in a gentleman who regarded himself as a grasshopper. They would certainly have considered his rival in misapprehension to be a blasphemer. And if Mr. Chesterton would fail to find pleasure in the company of a man who believed himself to be that fairly attractive, though monotonous, insect, how much less pleasure would he derive from sharing his apartments with a man who believed not only himself, but all men, to be worms?

He is personally the most kindly and agreeable of men, in whom the one virtue commonly ascribed to fat men, that of good nature, is most highly developed. His anger is almost completely impersonal. His pardon is on the heels of his condemnation. The sins of jealousy and hatred are unknown to him, and he seems to be without the power of resenting things done to himself. It is a tribute to the charm of his character and the equability of his temper that his stoutest admirers are those who most vigorously combat his views, and that most of his friends are men who do not share any of his views, except perhaps the only view that matters, the view that an ill deed must be exposed and a wrong put right. He is Don Quixote in the body of Sancho Panza.

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